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## Career Sustaining Factors for Campus-Based Fraternity/Sorority Advising Professionals: A Grounded Theory Study

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**: Career Sustaining Factors for Campus-Based Fraternity/Sorority Ad  
CAREER SUSTAINING FACTORS FOR CAMPUS-BASED FRATERNITY/SORORITY  
ADVISING PROFESSIONALS: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY**

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*The purpose of this study was to understand the process Fraternity/Sorority Advising (FSA) professionals utilize to sustain their careers beyond five years. Participants' wellness practices and burnout experiences were explored through semi-structured interviews. This study included 26 participants who had sustained their career as a full-time, campus-based FSA for a minimum of five years. Through a grounded theory method, several themes were found, and a career sustainability and wellness model was generated. Career sustaining practices are defined, and applicable use of the model is presented.*

Many Fraternity/Sorority Advising (FSA) professionals do not sustain a career in the field beyond five years, and their overall attrition rate is higher as compared to their colleagues in student affairs (Koepsell & Stillman, 2016). While there are a number of ideas as to why professionals choose to leave the field, little research has been conducted on what factors sustain professionals to stay in the field. Professional and personal life balance, wellness, and burnout in the work place are topics that are often addressed by student affairs supervisors, at conferences, work seminars, and in general conversations with family and friends. An assumption exists that these contexts may influence job attrition within the career field of FSAs; however, little research has been conducted to support this theory. While the topic has been researched in a global manner, Ramon (2005) argued that minimal research addressed student affairs professionals.

The purpose of this study was to understand the processes that FSA professionals employ to sustain careers beyond five years, through the generation of a grounded theory exploring the pathways linking the key factors together. Employing a grounded theory approach, data were collected to gain an understanding of professionals' experiences in sustaining a career in the field, as well as their experiences with wellness and burnout. This study was driven by the following research question how do Fraternity/

Sorority Advising professionals sustain a career in the field for more than five years? This question is supported by the following two sub-questions: (a) How do FSA professionals process their experiences with burnout during their career up to the point of the interview? (b) How do FSA professionals incorporate personal wellness into their career process? A two-tiered sampling method was used, consisting of participants in an initial convenience sample group followed by a theoretical sampling group. In addition to the semi-structured interviews, subjects were studied based on various demographics that include, age, number of years in the field, highest level of education, type of graduate program, percentage of time spent in a counselor-type role, average number of hours worked, size of fraternity/sorority community, salary, and gender.

### **Literature Review**

When exploring the reasoning behind professionals' decision to either stay in the field of Fraternity Sorority Advising (FSA) or leaving it (either for a different role in higher education/student affairs or leaving higher education all together), some themes have been presented in previous research within the context of higher education. In a recent white paper (authoritative report) distributed to the

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membership of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors, it was reported that 57% of members are professionals with less than five years of experience in the field; compared to an industry norm of 15-20% of those considered new professionals in the general student affairs population (Koespell & Stillman, 2016). The average number of years reported in the profession by members was 3.33 with a low median age of 30 years old. (Koespell & Stillman, 2016).

### *Wellness and Burnout Models*

Burnout was initially used to refer to symptoms found in counselors and psychologists who were overworked. Since that time, it has been applied to a variety of professions including nursing, social services, legal services, law enforcement, and education (Maslach, 1982; Starrin, Larsson, & Styrborn, 1990; Dillon & Tanner, 1995). Wellness practices have been extensively studied in both the counseling profession and regarding general work-life balance (Hettler, 1984; Myers, Sweeney, & Witmer, 2000; Myers, Mofley, & Booth, 2003; Yager & Tovar-Blank, 2007). Wellness has been researched concerning college students; however, little has been found related to those who educate students by working in higher education (Beauchemin, 2014; Hermon & Davis, 2004). However, research specific to the profession of Fraternity/Sorority Advising has not been found.

While several models of burnout and wellness exist within the literature, no model was found that specifically combined the preventative practices that study participants employed to sustain their careers as Fraternity and Sorority Professionals. Wellness and burnout have been constant points of discussion and present in the professional development for FSA professionals in recent years. However, I was unable to find specific publish research linking wellness and burnout to the attrition of FSA professionals.

### *Attrition in the Student Affairs Profession*

Considering both wellness and burnout among FSAs, it is also important to account for how long professionals remain within the field. Attrition within the general student affairs profession appears in the research mainly as qualitative studies conducted with participants who have left the field. Marshall, Moore Gardner, Hughes, and Lowery (2016) reported that over the last 30 years, student affairs professionals have left the field because of overall job satisfaction, work environment issues, declining morale, and transition issues from graduate school to professional life. Mid-level administrators added additional concerns regarding role ambiguity, supervision, lack of professional development opportunities, and low pay and limited career advancement opportunities as conditions when considering leaving the field (Marshall, Moore Gardner, Hughes, & Lowery, 2016; Rosser & Javinar, 2003). Seven general themes were found as reasons for leaving the field of student affairs they that included: excessive hours and burnout, non-competitive salary, attractive career alternatives, work-life conflict, limited opportunities, role of the supervisor or institutional fit, and lack of challenge or loss of passion (Marshall, Moore Gardner, Hughes, & Lowery, 2016; Rosser & Javinar, 2003).

While the rate of attrition is of concern for the profession, not much research has been found specifically addressing why or how professionals stay in the field. Given the high turnover rate from new professionals in Fraternity/Sorority Advising (Koespell & Stillman, 2016), additional research should be conducted to investigate what factors support individuals in the transition from new professionals to mid-level administrators. When considering the attrition rate in student affairs it is important to consider how professionals enter the field given that there is not an undergraduate major or degree specific to the profession.

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### *Socialization into Student Affairs*

The way that a professional enters their role may have an impact on their attrition in that job or with that institution. The transition into a new role can be a challenging process as a person learns the social norms in that setting. Barr (1990) described five tasks that new professionals face when transitioning into a new job: obtaining and using information, developing expectations for performance, creating a practical understanding of theory, mapping out the environment, and continuing to grow professionally. Socialization into the profession and a specific position can speak to professional job fit. The role of a supervisor also impacts a new professional's transition into the career field.

### *Supervision*

Supervision and professional relationships have been found to play a role in the attrition of professionals in student affairs. Supervision, defined as "any relationship where one person has the responsibility to provide leadership, direction, information, motivation or support for one or more persons" (Schuh & Carlise, 1991, p. 497), is a relationship that every employee in student affairs will encounter. Supervision includes specific skill sets such as, effective communication, listening, leadership ability, organization, adaptability, and demonstrated expertise. Supervision in student affairs is often conducted through a synergistic approach. Winston and Creamer (1997) described synergistic supervision as the process by which the university can support team members as opposed to administering only harsh penalties for work that is unsatisfactory. Synergistic supervision is comprised of eight characteristics: dual focus, joint effort, two-way communication, focus of competence, goal setting, growth orientation, and a systemic and ongoing process. The relationship between a supervisor and supervisee is built on trust and genuine respect for each other (Winston & Creamer, 1997).

Shupp and Arminio (2012) after noting a lack

of research regarding supervision practices in the student affairs profession; conducted a study the reinforced the idea that supervision has an impact on retention of new professionals. The study noted five barriers to supervision: lack of supervision/direction out of graduate school for new professionals, supervisor with lack of understanding of the student affairs profession, lack of communication, lack of focus on supervisee/lack of time spent with supervisee, and close-mindedness and lack of focus (Shupp & Arminio, 2012). Their recommendations were connected to a synergistic supervision approach. This was a qualitative study with a small sample size all located in the same state. Continued research on supervision in student affairs would be a benefit in addressing job attrition and stress among professionals.

### *Job Attrition and Burnout*

Burnout among student affairs professionals has been researched mainly regarding job attrition within the field. Silver and Jakeman (2014) found that among five themes for reasons that student affairs professionals leave the field, three may also contribute to burnout: lack of fulfillment, student affairs as devalued work, and emotional burdens. Their study on Master's students' career plans showcases that attrition can occur even before students graduate from their program. This highlights the need for more research to be done in the field on how to avoid burnout both in graduate programs and as fulltime professionals in the field of Fraternity/Sorority Advising, in addition to the global profession of student affairs.

Burnout has been correlated with absenteeism and job turnover. Maslach (1978) stated, "Often the response to burnout is to quit and to get out, to change jobs, to move into some sort of administrative work, even to leave the profession entirely" (p. 57). This is observed to be true for the profession of Fraternity/Sorority advising; however, no studies have been found specifically on the population of professionals working in

Fraternity/Sorority Advising. When individuals believe that they are no longer able to adapt to life's stressors, burnout may occur (Shaw, Bensky, & Dixon, 1981). Burnout is generally defined as a type of psychological stress that is exhibited by a lack of motivation, exhaustion, and depersonalization; this often occurs among professionals who work with people as a main component of their job (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). Maslach, Jackson, and Leiter (1996) further referred to burnout as "a crisis in one's relationship with work" (p. 202); this differs from depression, which is more pervasive and present in all parts of a person's life.

### Methods

A grounded theory approach was used to conduct the study. The following question guided the study: How do Fraternity/Sorority Advising professionals sustain careers in the field for more than five years? This question was supported by the following two sub-questions: (a) How do FSA professionals process their experiences with burnout during their career up to the point of the interview? (b) How do FSA professionals incorporate personal wellness into their career process?

Grounded theory is a specific analytic technique that is fixed in symbolic interactionism and the belief the individual psychology and motivation are impacted by the social meanings that individuals derive from intersubjectivity (Charmaz, 2014). It is important to highlight that within grounded theory, the term "theory" refers to understanding processes and actions by humans. Individuals' self-concepts and personal motivations are always evolving as they develop meaning based on their interactions with the outside world (Charmaz, 2014).

The research is broken into two phases: data collection and data analysis, which occur simultaneously within the grounded theory method (Charmaz, 2014). The first phase, data collection, included semi-structured video-

conference or face-to-face interviews that lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. Each participant was asked if they would like to review their interview transcript and asked to participate in a follow-up phone call. During this follow-up phone call participants were given the opportunity to provide any thoughts, feelings, or experiences that they had because of the initial interview. Interviews continued with participants until saturation was reached for the theory development. Participants' interviews that occurred after the saturation point were included as the theoretical sample pool. Charmaz (2014) noted that "Categories are 'saturated' when gathering fresh data no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of these core theoretical categories" (p. 213). For this study saturation was confidently reached at the 16th interview. Interview questions were adjusted, for the theoretical sample, to generate support for the developing theory. Second interviews were conducted with a smaller sample who chose to participate once all the participants had been interviewed and preliminary data analyzed. The participants in the second interviews provided thoughts and reactions to a summary report of the themes that emerged from the data analysis.

The second phase of the research, data analysis, was conducted in conjunction with the data collection. Components of the data analysis included coding, memo writing, and refining interview questions (Charmaz, 2014). The data analyzed included video/audio recordings of the interviews, transcriptions, and a research journal recording my observations. I met regularly with a peer consultant to further explore my own biases, reactions, and experiences, addressing how they might have influenced the research. I synthesized the participants' experiences to examine patterns and relationships that emerge from the concepts regarding FSA professionals' experiences that sustain their career for more than five years (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

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### *Participant Demographics*

Each participant was recruited through a post made on the NASPA Fraternity and Sorority Knowledge Group on Facebook. Each was contacted by email to ensure that they met the study requirements, and then an initial call was used to review the informed consent and purpose of the study. Participant demographic information was provided through an open-ended questionnaire. During the initial phone call, many participants noted a concern of being identified through the research. To maintain the confidentiality of the participants the demographic questionnaires were anonymous and not tied to individuals. One participant did not complete the demographic survey, because they only participated in the second round of interviews. To ensure anonymity during this

study each participant was given the opportunity to select a pseudonym that was used throughout the study. Those participants who did not self-select a pseudonym were assigned one for use throughout the study. All personally identifying information (such as names of specific places of work or volunteer roles within the field) were disguised.

A summary of the demographic information of the 25 participants from the initial interviews can be found below (see Table 1). A request from the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors (AFA) membership database (2017) shows that there are 222 members who maintain a campus-based professional membership in the association and have held that membership distinction for a minimum of five years. These members are those that were deemed eligible for the study based on

**Table 1**

*Summary Report: Demographic of Participants in initial interviews*

<u>Summary Report: Demographics of n = 25 participants in initial interviews.*</u>	
Years in the Field	
Range	6 years to 27 years
Mean	13.12 years
Standard deviation	5.67
Reported Age	
Range	30 years – 58 years
Mean	37.8 years
Standard deviation	7.03
Gender	
Female	12 (48%)
Male	11 (44%)
Not Reported	2 (8%)
Highest Education Achieved	
Master's Degree	16
With Doctoral Study	6
Doctoral Degree	3
Master's Degree Type	
Higher Education/Student Affairs	19
Administrative	
College Counseling/Student Affairs	6

\*26th participant did not submit a demographic questionnaire, 2nd interview only.

the first two participant requirements (specific membership in AFA and years spent as a full-time professional FSA). The 26 participants (25 initial interview participants and one additional expert) interviewed equate to 11.71% of the total number of members eligible.

## Results

Through a constant comparative analysis coding system, the data collected from the interviews and demographic survey discovered six sustaining factors that participants employed

**Table 2**

*Themes, Codes, and Significant Statements Summary*

Themes	Codes	Significant Statements
Burnout	Frequently feeling emotionally drained or exhausted	"When you are so emotionally and passionately drained by one thing and you can no longer give too much into it."
	Feeling defeated	"I just do not want to do this anymore."
	Feeling overwhelmed	"We continue to have the same conversations over and over and still haven't found any answers"
	No longer caring about the work	"When you can't find the motivation to do your job anymore, when you are stretched so far that you cannot find the meaning in your work. Not caring if things get done or are done well."
	No longer feeling present at work	"I would roll into the office 30 minutes late and did not care about anything that happened with the institution, but I still cared about the students."
	Unable to find joy in the work	"When you are approaching a job you've done before and you cannot find any joy and it becomes a burden."
	Feeling that the work is unmanageable	"There was an expectation of perfection and to be in the office until the work was done."
Wellness	Feeling as though the work is a burden	"carrying more than the students I was serving."
	Physical wellness	"I take dance classes, it helps to be physically fit but also allows for an escape from the rest of my life."
	Social interaction	"When you are feeling burnout you want to reach out during those times and I am fortunate to have friends and family."
	Spiritual connection	"Spirit... peace, calling, and feeling fulfilled."
	Mental or emotional wellness	"...do things that make me happy"
Outside Interests	An absence of stress	"...my body starts shutting down, when I get myself to that point where I've overwhelmed myself."
	Social connections	"In current role, I was very intent on make friends outside of higher education. I need to do things outside of my job so I am not focusing only on my work."
	Leaving work at work	"the work will still be there tomorrow"
Relationships Matter	Setting Boundaries	"...you are not going to get a break, if your down time is spent sitting around with colleagues gripping about work. You have to find that external thing, whatever that may be."
	Positive Relationships	"Very lucky to have a supervisor who really modeled how to be an effective professional."
Important Work to be Done	Negative Relationships	"I hated going to work, not because of the students but because of the culture of the office and the university, I dreaded going to work... I wasn't happy and I knew I wasn't happy and I knew that I needed to get out."
	If not me then who?	"Why am I continuing to do this?" "Came back to, if I'm not here to battle this, than who is."
Making an Impact	Student connections	"Getting a thank you from the students is still the biggest motivator even if it does not happen that often."
	Community changes	"Realized that I was making a difference that were really impactful."

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to remain active in the field. These six factors were further developed to inform a career sustainability and wellness model and a practice anchored in the process of self-reflection.

### *Themes*

Six main themes emerged from the data: burnout, wellness, outside interests, relationships matter, doing important work, and making an impact (Table 2). In addition, a process for sustaining a career as a FSA professional through wellness practices emerged from the data. The developed model includes the practice of the six themes discovered through the process of self-reflection.

*Burnout.* Evolving from the data within the participants' interviews, burnout was generally defined as a loss of passion or purpose for the work as a FSA professional. Participants highlighted that the expectations of the FSA field set professionals up to experience burnout. While participants discussed how the profession encourages burnout, especially for new professionals, they also noted that talking about experiences of burnout are not normal within the profession.

Some participants indicated that they had trusted relationships with colleagues in the profession with whom they had shared their feelings of burnout. However, other participants shared that the initial interview was the first time that they shared their experiences of burnout with anyone. Feelings of being alone in the field with burnout also seemed to impact feelings of worth in the profession. One participant, Gene, asked, "Am I in an abusive relationship with this profession?" This was a powerful statement and spoke to the norm that professionals in the field hold expectations that in order to be a 'good advisor' they must always be working to a level of burnout. Most participants reported that they questioned whether they went into the right profession during times of burnout.

Specific experiences of burnout also emerged from the data and further clarified the definition of burnout. Those experiences include: frequently

feeling emotionally drained or exhausted, feeling defeated, feeling overwhelmed, no longer caring about the work, no longer feeling present at work, unable to find joy in the work, feeling that the work is unmanageable, and feeling as though the work is a burden.

*Frequently feeling emotionally drained or exhausted.* Due to the nature of the work several participants reported that there are times throughout the academic year that cause feelings of being emotionally drained or exhausted. The Sorority formal recruitment process was given as an example since it is a time of the year where professionals can spend long days on campus for several days in a row. However, participants identified a difference between feeling drained (just tired) due to a campus event versus feeling drained (fatigue) due to experiencing burnout.

*Feeling defeated.* Participants described feelings of being defeated with expressions such as "I felt I am done." "I'm not meant to do this." and "I just don't want to do this anymore." Other participants noted that they felt defeated because they did not have good role models or supervisors and they did not recognize that the work could look any different. Participants shared similar feelings in reaching a point that they just could not face their work, campus, office, or colleagues.

*Feeling overwhelmed.* Participants also described feelings of being overwhelmed with the work on a more global level. They highlighted national hazing deaths and high-risk alcohol situations. Participants highlighted that the FSA profession continues to address and discuss these student issues and behaviors, but nothing seems to "move the needle" and create change on the national level with these organizations. One participant explained that external pressures to create change with Fraternity and Sorority Life communities come from campus administrators, media, and the national organizations.

*No longer caring about the work.* Participants shared that when they were feeling burnout out they cared less about their work because they



were not committed to their work and no longer cared if it was done or if work was “sloppy”. When reflecting on her own experience, Adrienne described this feeling, “When you can’t find the motivation to do your job anymore, when you are stretched so far that you cannot find the meaning in your work. Not caring if things get done or are done well”. Several other participants shared times that they gave less to the job because they were lacking motivation.

*No longer feeling present at work.* In addition to not caring about the work, participants also reported times of feeling disengaged while at work. Ashley characterized it as a struggle to maintain perspective at work, “When feeling burnout... I was struggling to find perspective and see the bigger picture. It is harder when you do not have support.” Claudia noted that being present is an expectation for the FSA profession, “This is a profession where we ask people to be invested and stay present with people, so it is really hard to completely keep our personal selves separate from our professional selves.” Considering this as an expectation of the role, the impact of not being present at work led some participants to feel guilty about their burnout.

*Unable to find the joy in the work.* Every participant reported a time when they realized that work they used to enjoy was no longer bringing them joy. For some this was due to specific expectations of their job, such as adjudicating or investigating student conduct cases. For other participants, this was a more encompassing feeling affecting all aspects of their life. They reported that their normal wellness activities no longer brought the same kind of relief. Participants who reported that their lack of joy in their work was due more to campus or office dynamics and environment left those roles to find a position at a campus that was more in line with their personal expectations and needs.

*Feeling that the work is unmanageable.* Feelings of the work being unmanageable arose around work or supervisor expectations. Vivianne described that in a previous position, “There was an

expectation of perfection and to be in the office until the work was done.” She reflected that she would stay in the office until nine pm every night, and she had no friends or outside life. It was when she transitioned into another position that she realized that it was possible to do the work and still have a life. Charlie noticed that there is a willingness in the field of student affairs to take on more work hours than others. When speaking about graduate students who have worked in his office he reflected, “I wonder why the Higher Ed students are less likely to be able to find some balance, willing to work over their hours.” It is hard to know if this is based on the expectation of the jobs or if individuals gravitate toward the profession because it is within their nature to equate number of hours worked to success.

*Feeling as though the work is a burden.* When asked how they defined burnout some participants specifically described times when they felt their work was a burden. This was often coupled with the loss of joy for the work. Claudia described a time when working with a student leader during a student conduct case and being disappointed in his direct involvement in providing alcohol to underage new members, after she had invested time in working with him. She referenced the emotional burden as “carrying more than the students I was serving.”

*Wellness.* To specifically address the sub-question, how FSA professionals incorporate personal wellness into their career process; two specific questions were included in the initial interviews. (1) Please share your personal definition of wellness and (2) What types of activity do you consider to be part of your personal wellness? Participants’ answers from these questions and additional stories shared during the interviews formed the foundation for a definition of wellness. All participants discussed wellness as a holistic practice, one that includes several life aspects. Participants viewed wellness as a spectrum identifying that the idea to achieve balance between the previously mentioned aspects essential for FSAs, was an

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unrealistic goal. These aspects addressed by participants were broken down into five codes under wellness that include: physical wellness, social interaction, spiritual connection, mental or emotional health, and an absence of stress.

*Physical wellness.* Physical wellness included exercise, diet, and sleep. Every participant described a physical connection regarding their wellness. For several, this physical aspect was grounded in exercise; those most listed were running, taking walks, and taking dance classes. Some participants connected their physical wellness to walking or hiking outside, highlighting the time spent in nature was also beneficial. Others connected the physical aspect mainly to food, including eating healthy, cooking, and “eating delicious things” as one participant noted. Several participants reported that their physical wellness activities also impacted the social, spiritual, and mental areas of wellness and helped to alleviate overall feelings of stress and anxiety.

*Social interaction.* Every participant discussed the importance of creating and maintaining social connections and relationships, including support both on their campus and from outside of their campus. Participants reported the positive impact that supervisors and colleagues could have on their wellness at work. When discussing social relationships outside of their campus participants also described how this reinforced the importance of setting boundaries. Several participants reported that they learned that it was acceptable to take time away from the office to spend time with friends, participate in a sports league, attend a dance class, or spend time with family members. In addition, participants noted that they learned this aspect of wellness through an experience with burnout. The importance of finding and maintaining social connections came up in nearly every participant interview when asked, “what advice would you give to yourself as a new professional?” Some participants noted a connection between their social and spiritual realms, highlighting that they

participated in activities that full-filled both, including attending services and other religious affiliated social gatherings.

*Spiritual connection.* Some participants specifically identified religious affiliations, while others spoke about the attention they pay to their mind and spirit/soul. This was identified in having a sense of purpose and a larger connection to the world. Spiritual connection was the aspect that more participants reflected on during the optional second interview. After seeing the summary report, several participants described their own spiritual connections even though it was not something they had mentioned during their initial interview.

*Mental or emotional health.* Participants shared experiences regarding the importance of expressing feelings of sadness, disappointment, and joy from work or life encounters. Participants reported several different ways that they processed their emotions that were brought up by work. Several participants shared that they were external processors and they felt most supported when they could share their emotions with others through social connections. Other participants discussed the time they spent in reflection and paying attention to their emotions and mental health. A few participants described the ability to take a mental health day or plan for days off following a hectic time as an important piece to their wellness as a professional. Several participants highlighted reading to be a part of their mental wellness.

*An absence of stress.* In addition to paying attention to each of these areas every participant also noted that they recognized their wellness through the absence of stress. Several participants noted that they learned their definition of wellness based on experiences with stress and burnout. They discussed that negative impacts from stress were absent when they believed they were experiencing a greater level of wellness. Some participants described experiencing stress in two ways. The first was when stress was productive, for instance a participant was

under a deadline and the stress “helped as a motivator.” The second type of stress was when it was no longer productive but rather led the participants to feel the impacts of burnout. Several participants reported that when there was too much stress in their work or life their sleep was impacted they either noticed that they would fall asleep as soon as they got home or would be kept up at night with thoughts. Several participants described times that they called in sick into work because they were overwhelmed from their level of stress.

*Outside Interests.* The theme of Outside Interests related closely to the Social Connections realm of wellness in this study. Participants noted that having an interest outside of higher education was one of the most important factors to sustaining a career in FSA. Examples from participants included: an outside interest or hobby, outside social group, or family connections. Also, within this theme was the importance of leaving work at the office and setting boundaries to avoid having work on the mind all the time. Charlie phrased it well when he started, “...you are not going to get a break, if your down time is spent sitting around with colleagues griping about work. You have to find that external thing, whatever that may be.” Many participants noted that “the work will still be there tomorrow” and “we are not curing cancer” specifically as a reminder to gain perspective on the global importance of the FSA professional’s role.

*Relationships Matter.* Every participant shared an experience where a professional relationship contributed towards his/her burnout or wellness. Those relationships most often included a direct supervisor. Those that described their supervision experience as micromanaged, lacking trust from the direct supervisor, or there was little to no support or contact with their supervisor, also reported that relationship as a factor into their feelings of burnout.

Participants who reported the influence from positive work relationships with colleagues and students described that they had an impact on

their wellness by helping to temper feelings of burnout. They described these relationships as supportive, having mutual respect, and caring. Several participants explained their career shift to becoming a supervisor and how they have taken the lessons they have learn from their own experiences to incorporate into how they manage and support their staff members. More than half of the participants spoke about their career evolution; specifically, how their role changed when they were tasked to supervise others. A main concern that was reported was that supervision skills and models are not taught in graduate programs and are rarely addressed through professional development opportunities.

*Important Work to be Done.* Participants reported that one of the factors in sustaining their careers as FSA professionals even during times of burnout was a belief that there was still more work to be done in the field. Many expressed that they did not feel finished with the work. A common statement from the interviews was “If not me, then who?” Participants described their careers as a “calling,” explaining that their commitment to the field feels natural, and they feel valued when they see that important changes are being made.

Participants also highlighted this as an opportunity for advocacy in the profession; that more needed to be done to address how FSA professionals are supported. Participants spoke to the work that they thought needed to be accomplished by professional associations. Specially, doing more to advocate the elevation of status of FSA professionals on college campuses from entry level positions, to mid-level positions at a minimum. This theme related closely to the next theme because as participants often described knowing that the work was being accomplished because they “...were making an impact.”

*Making an Impact.* Participants noted that they felt most valued as a professional when they had an experience that confirmed that they were making an impact to the field and the fraternity/

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sorority student experience. The word “impact” was used in every interview, including the optional second interviews. During the second interview, several participants highlighted that they wished the study had found a way of measuring impact; however, most of the participants defined impact as “feeling valued” or “seeing change in my community.” Feeling as though they were not making an impact was brought up as an indicator of burnout. Many noted the relationships they had formed with students over the years, watching students develop, and having students thank them as being an important reason for why they have stayed in the field. These student messages reinforced that the professional was having an impact on their campus.

Participants also described experiences where they could witness the long-term change in the student communities that they worked with. While participants described experiences with seeing community change on a local level at their own campuses, most also indicated that not enough of an impact was being made on a national level with these student organizations or in the FSA profession.

### **Steiner Self-Reflection Sustainability and Wellness Model**

This study generated a sustainability model that supports a long-term career through wellness and self-reflection in the FSA profession. The themes and codes identified from participants’ interviews were combined to create the model including the three phases for managing professional burnout and wellness. The experiences with burnout reported by participants included feeling defeated, emotionally drained, and overwhelmed by the work, connected previously found research (Dillon & Tanner, 1995; Freudenberger, 1980; Maslach, 1982; Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2008; Silver & Jakeman, 2014; Starrin, Larsson, & Styrborn, 1990). This model has

been developed to provide support to FSA professionals in sustaining their careers through experiences with burnout.

The Steiner Self-Reflection Sustainability and Wellness (SSRSW) Model (Figure 1) consists of three different phases: the Observation Phase, the Preparation Phase, and the Recovery Phase. Each phase is connected to the others, but do not function in a linear pattern and more than one phase may be happening at the same time. Each phase is anchored through the process of self-reflection and relationships connect the process to an individual’s career. The model may be used by individuals for personal reference and reflection or to offer support to others to recognize and address burnout.

#### ***The Observation Phase***

The Observation Phase requires self-reflection from an individual. During this phase people take note of what burnout looks like for them and times that burnout is more likely to occur. During the observation phase professionals are likely to experience the aspects of burnout identified in the three subscales in the Maslach Burnout Inventory: General Survey (MBI-GS); emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and professional efficacy (Maslach, Jackson & Leiter, 1997). Participants in the study often described their feelings of burnout as feeling drained or exhausted. Cynicism that “reflects indifference or a distant attitude toward work” (p.209) was also reported by participants when they shared a personal story of their own burnout in the field. Examples of the behaviors that participants reported both for themselves and when they overserved burnout in others included: loss of sleep, being more sarcastic (making snide comments, rolling eyes), feeling disengaged during meetings, being short-tempered, longer response time, not being present at work (both physically and mentally), keeping their office door closed more often, and having a sense that they are just going through the motions. The following prompts may be used to assist

professionals in their self-reflection process during this phase.

- Consider what you experience during a burn event, how do you feel, how do you interact with others, what have others shared with you regarding how they experience you during those times.
- Ask trusted friends/colleagues what they

notice about you when they think you are beginning to experience burnout.

- Pay attention to others, what behaviors do you see from them when you believe that they are experiencing feelings of burnout.
- Track your burn experiences: are there patterns with the timing, people, interactions, or events?

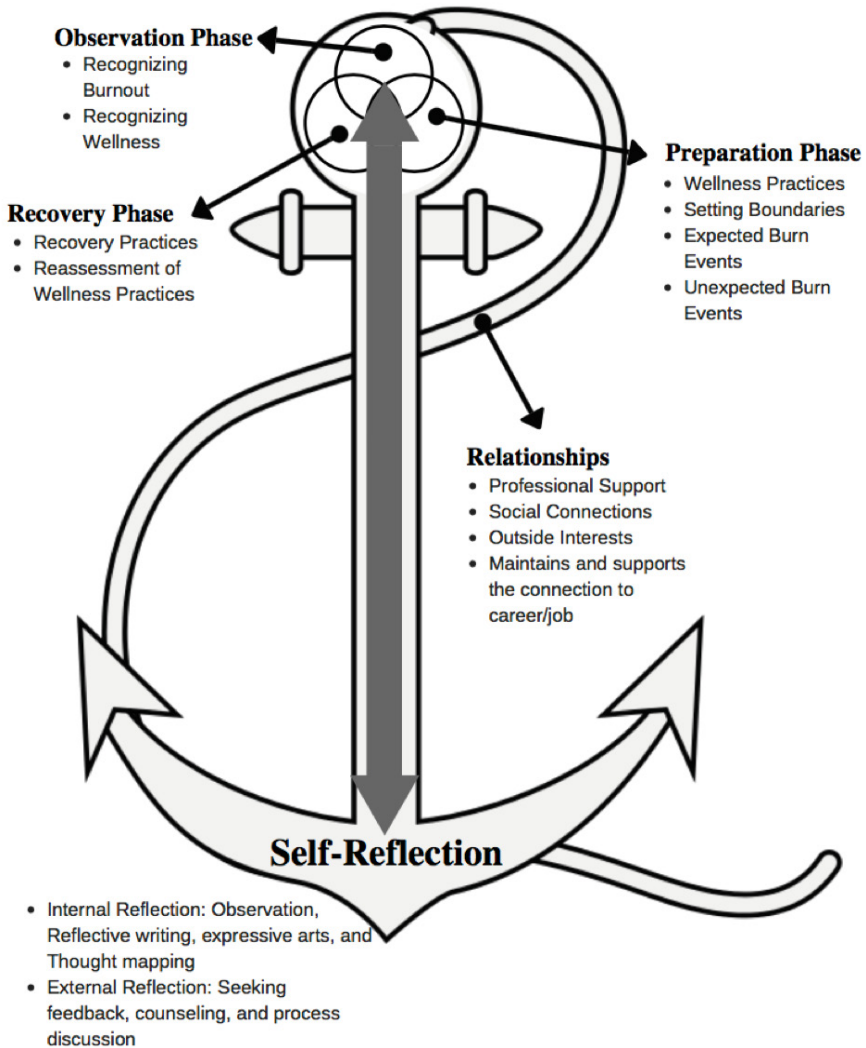


Figure 1

Steiner Self-Reflection Sustainability and Wellness Model Diagram

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Since several participants described this as a time where they felt alone with their experience it is important to normalize the experience of burnout in the profession as part of this phase.

### *The Preparation Phase*

The previous literature found addressing burnout and attrition in the profession of student affairs, is more focused on the recognition of burnout. Burnout is seen as something to be avoided rather than a process to prepare for by embracing it as a natural experience. This study found that several of the participants viewed burnout as an experience to prepare for; by highlighting key times of the academic year that they knew were busier than other times (expected burn events). The three times most often reported were sorority recruitment, the month of October, and the month of April. This phase encourages individuals to plan for the times that work will keep them on campus for longer hours. This again normalizes the experience of burnout found in the professions of FSA and student affairs. This phase is closely related to the recovery phase because individuals who are in preparation will need to include a plan on how they will recover specifically from this busy time.

The preparation phase also includes a day to day focus on an individual's wellness practices. Participants from the study described how a consistent focus on wellness better prepared them for unexpected burnout events (i.e. major student conduct case, student death, or major role transition). This experience has been verified by previous research in the field of counselor education (Hettler, 1984; Myers, Sweeney, & Witmer, 2000; Myers, Mobley, & Booth, 2003; Yager & Tovar-Blank, 2007), but none was found specific to the population in this study.

Professionals should spend time reflecting on how each aspect of wellness plays a role in their life. An example activity would be to create a thought map of each area; physical, social, spiritual, and emotional/mental, and how they include each into their daily life practices. FSA professionals value ritual encouraging the

creation of a daily preparation ritual may assist them in the continuous reflection process. This is also a time that professionals should consider including counseling as part of their wellness practices. Having a relationship based in unconditional positive regard before they have a need to recover will offer a strong foundation of support.

### *The Recovery Phase*

The recovery phase may occur following either an expected or unexpected burn event. This phase is most notable as a period of reflection and centering for an individual. Individuals will likely move quickly from this phase into either the observation phase of the preparation phase. A key element to this phase is the practice of spending time away from work. This may include taking a vacation, using sick time, or using flex-time. This time away may be planned in advanced or enacted when individuals feel that they are at a breaking point due to burn events.

Recovery occurs in different ways depending on the need of the individual and the event experienced. Professionals should reflect on recovery experiences and have a list of ways that they can recover. This can include having dinner with a friend, taking a quick walk on campus to reset after a challenging meeting, taking a day off from work, or enjoying good meal. Relationships are an important component to the recovery phase.

### *Self-Reflection and Relationships*

The SSRSW Model includes two areas that are present through each of the three phases; self-reflection and relationships. Each phase encourages self-reflection to identify an individual's indicators of burnout, wellness practices, key busy times, and methods for recovery. Rose explained such as reflection process as asking herself the following questions: "What do I have control over, what do I have the opportunity to influence, what do I need to ask for and what do I need to let go?" These reflection

questions would benefit individuals during the observation and recovery phases.

Each phase is also supported through social connections and relationships. This includes interests outside of the professional's work environment and support and connections from supervisors and colleagues within their campus environment. Specific training in this phase needs to include an assessment of the supportive people in FSA professionals' lives. Professionals should create a list of those who are supportive and those who present more of a challenge. People on the supportive list should be utilized when professionals feel themselves in need of external processing. Professionals should address ways of working with or recovering from work with those that they find to be a challenge.

Self-reflection impacts all three phases, while relationships is the link between professionals and their career/work. These components support individuals in building a personalized process that will help them sustain through experiences with burnout. While previous wellness models (Hettler, 1984; Sweeney & Witmer, 1991; Witmer & Sweeney, 1992) support the data found here, this is a unique model not currently found in previously literature.

### Implications

This study was conducted through a grounded theory qualitative method generated a process that FSA professionals use to sustain their career following experiences with burnout. There a number of applications for the model that was developed through this research.

#### *Fraternity/Sorority Advising Profession*

The FSA profession has a documented challenge in retaining workers in the field beyond five years. This attrition rate is higher for FSA professionals when compared to general student affairs professionals (Koepsell & Stillman, 2016). This study was focused on professionals who have been able to sustain their career in the field

beyond the fifth year. While there are additional reasons why professionals leave the field, this study highlighted that experiences with burnout may be one cause. Implementing programming and education for professionals in the field will help them develop their own resiliency to burnout experiences. The SSRSW Model can be adapted to educate professionals at all levels of their career. Training can be introduced to students during their graduate program. Supervisors training in the model will provide additional support to their staff members. This model could be used in one-on-one meetings between supervisors and employees by working through the model together. Working together to identify expected burn events and developing a recovery plan, is one example. The reflection questions can be used as agenda items during a staff meeting. Professional associations can offer additional reinforcement through programming in webinars and conference programming.

In addition to educational seminars being offered through professional associations, offering virtual reflection and processing meetings would be a benefit by providing a space for professionals to connect with one another. Several participants referred to their participation in the study as a therapeutic experience, stating that they wished that the field was more open to these discussions. Small group and mentoring sessions allow and encourage these discussions to occur between FSA professionals. This education, guided reflection time, and programming will help to normalize the experience of burnout and enhance professionals' resiliency to remain in the field. Through the study several areas of advocacy needed in the field also arose.

*Advocacy in the field.* Participants in the study reported several areas that require advocacy in the field. While not specifically related to the data that generated the model, it is important to note the barriers that were brought to light during the interviews. Every participant highlighted staffing structures as a concern for the profession. Experiences with burnout for



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some came from staffing structures and support particularly, a large student/professional ratio, one-person offices, and being looked over for employment because years of experience was more than three years (positions listed as entry level). It would benefit the profession for those in the field of student affairs to consider, how to better promote the importance of the position of FSAs on college campuses. Focused discussion with higher-level student affairs administrators and university presidents would be an important step. We see this work currently emerging through NAPSA. The topics of prevention education on hazing, alcohol, and sexual misconduct were discussed as those that weigh heavily on participants in the study. Additional education and partnerships on these topic areas would be important for professionals who reported having to be knowledgeable in all areas.

Participants also discussed the importance for gatekeeping among professionals in the field. A few specifically mentioned their concern for having long-term professionals who are not skilled in the work. AFA recently updated the core competencies to include a self-assessment, that may address some of those concerns. In addition, including the subject of professional impairment in association graduate student education, would provide an important foundation for addressing burnout and wellness in professional colleagues. Supervisors must also be educated in their role as a gatekeeper for the profession (Muratori, 2001). Addressing these concerns through advocacy for the FSA profession would also support the general profession of student affairs.

### Conclusion

This study resulted in the development of an innovative sustainability and wellness model. Through the interviews provided by the participants, this model best represents the sustainable practices that they used in their career. The impact from incorporating this

model in to the professional development of FSA professionals has the potential to reduce the attrition rate in the field. This model will help professionals sustain their career longer by increasing their overall wellness. Further, with additional development, the model has the potential to support professionals in student affairs and beyond.

The SSRSW Model brings together to concepts of wellness and burnout and anchors a cycle of addressing burnout in the process of self-reflection. By shifting the focus from avoiding burnout this model embraces burnout at part of the process and reviews how you observe, prepare, and recover from burn events. This is a developmental model, in that professionals who use the model will continue to evolve and change how they personally address career burn events as they occur. It is the hope of this author that with sufficient adoption of the model more FSA professionals will build additional resilience to stay in the field for a longer period of time.



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### Author Biography

**Dr. Kate Steiner** joined the Radford University campus in June 2018 as the director of fraternity and sorority life. She holds a Bachelor of Science degree in family consumer sciences from the University of Wyoming, a Master of Counseling degree from Idaho State University, and a Doctor of Philosophy degree in counselor education and supervision from the University of Wyoming. She has worked in the professions of student affairs and fraternity and sorority advising for 15 years. She currently serves as a lead facilitator for the Interactive Workshops division of CAMPUSPEAK. She holds a number of volunteer leadership positions most recently including the director of educational programming for the student leadership conferences for the Association of Fraternal Leadership & Values and as the assistant editor of the Oracle Research Journal for the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors. She is an active volunteer for her own sorority, Kappa Kappa Gamma serving as an Every Member Educator and facilitator.